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Local Government
Face to Face



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**LOCAL GOVERNMENT
FACE TO FACE**

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By

A. C. STEWART

B. Sc. (Econ.) Lond.

1933

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CONTENTS

CHAP.			PAGE
I	LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES	- -	9
II	HOW LOCAL AREAS ARE GOVERNED	- -	15
III	LONDON THE POWERFUL	- -	17
IV	JOINT BOARDS AND COMMITTEES	- -	19
V	A GLANCE AT HISTORY	- -	22
VI ✓	THE "AD HOC" THEORY	- -	25
VII ✓	COMMITTEES AND THEIR RELATIONS	- -	30
VIII ✓	BRAINS IN COMMITTEES	- -	35
IX	FRANK CO-OPERATION WANTED	- -	39
X	FINDING THE RIGHT OFFICIALS	- -	42

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CHAPTER I

Local Government Services

THERE ARE FEW spheres in which the steady application of commonsense is at once so imperatively necessary and yet so difficult to obtain as it is in that of politics and social affairs. The term "commonsense" has, unfortunately, been frequently abused, and it is therefore necessary to explain that in this pamphlet it is never used as a synonym for "rule of thumb." There is, in fact, no relationship. Rule of thumb follows when a thing is seen through a glass darkly, commonsense comes when it is seen face to face.

Local Government is, however, a great and complex organism to view in the course of one brief hour. An effort has been made to direct attention mainly to the life of the organism rather than to anatomical particulars. Attention is therefore directed first to some of the services performed by local government for the community; then to a view of the very considerable variety of local government authorities, which at first appears like a net of very uneven mesh over the country, but which in reality possesses a more lively and less tractable character. The system of control by the elected representatives of democracy is then examined—somewhat critically. Critically examined because democratic control is essential, and the organs by which it is exercised must therefore be adequate and certain in their operation. Finally, attention is focused on the official whose

duty it is on the one hand to carry out the behests of the elected councillors, and on the other to place his experience and observation in the field at the disposal of his council for their proper guidance: an important function calling for much knowledge, greater skill and a world of wisdom. Before concluding, a brief review is given of the steps taken by these officers to qualify themselves for their difficult duties.

Sir Ernest Simon, formerly Lord Mayor of Manchester, has observed that "A City Council's services mean the difference between savagery and civilisation." It is a startling claim to come from a practical business man of the standing and experience of Sir Ernest, and it becomes all the more so when it is remembered that most of the municipal services for which we pay to-day are the creation of the last seventy or eighty years. With regard to the years before this new system of local government developed, has not G. M. Trevelyan reminded readers that "the municipal life of the boroughs was already in Anne's reign suffering from senile decay? The corporate spirit of the burghers was so enfeebled that they could project no new forms to give it a fresh lease of life. They were content to watch the mediæval institutions of their City or Borough degenerate into antiquarian lumber . . . so long as the individual enjoyed political, religious and economic liberty as those terms were then understood, inefficient and corrupt municipal government was not very deeply resented."

A veritable ratepayers' paradise? Even Sir Ernest will admit the people were not exactly living in savagery. But unfortunately the system was expensive. Expensive in life, health and cleanliness. Despite the great increase in the density of population from 5,500,000 mainly rural to 40,000,000 mainly urban, the rate has been reduced from nearly 30 per thousand in the reign of Queen Anne to 20.9 per thousand in 1871-75, and to

LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES

11.4 per thousand in 1930. The mortality rate per thousand of infants of under one year was in 1871-75, 153, and in 1930, 60. Put in another way, these figures mean that what insurance companies call 'the expectation of life at birth' has, in two generations, been increased by 15 years. Typhus and cholera have become almost as rare as the plague, and it is seldom the ravages of enteric fever, malaria, scarlet fever, diphtheria, and other diseases are heard of in these islands, and the incidence of tuberculosis has also been reduced. The total cost of the security and comfort provided by the health services of local authorities was in 1929-30 about £39.0 million, that is about £1 per annum per head of population.

Much more costly than the public health services, however, is that of education, which in 1929-30 cost £85.7 millions. This is, of course, a considerable sum, and at times of acute economic pressure it has been repeatedly attacked by economisers. It is a not unmerited compliment to the age in which we live, that they always explain that no harm will be done to the cause of education. But it does strike the ordinary man as unreasonable when educational facilities are reduced and still the pretence is maintained that no real harm is being done to education. Education subserves many purposes, such as—

- (a) Personal and national industrial and commercial efficiency ;
- (b) Development of character and the sense of social and political responsibility ;
- (c) That fuller life which is the heritage of the educated man or woman.

It is against values in these spheres that the economiser must measure his money saving. He must balance the

utility of the last or marginal penny on the income tax or rates against (a) the growth of that rankling sense of injustice which arises when recognised ability and merit are denied full development; and (b) against his desire to equip the younger generation to make a better job of its life and problems than the older generation has succeeded in doing.

Next in the expenditure table comes "Highways" at £50.9 millions, and on this is based the development of road transport. But these, the benefits to industry, commerce and agriculture, are of that tangible kind which can more easily be appreciated by the statistically minded than can the values received from some of the social services. But even here there is a great danger of good management being sacrificed to penny savings. It is not merely a case where the old copy-book line, "a stitch in time, . . ." should be remembered. This is a case where industrial and commercial efficiency depends on sound development, and where consequently penny wisdom may spell pound foolishness.

Then comes "Relief of Poor," £33.9 millions, a deplorable item on which economy appears highly desirable. The way normally favoured is the prevention of destitution—an increase in the death rate of paupers not being acceptable to a modern democracy.

Municipal trading is responsible for an item of £113.3 millions in the expenditure accounts, but this includes £32.1 millions for loan charges covering interest and repayment of loans, £1.9 millions in relief of rates and £5.2 millions transferred to other local government accounts in addition to meeting all the working costs of the undertakings. The expenditure therefore includes substantial additions to the capital savings of the nation, i.e., repayment of loans—a nice sum in relief of rates, and normally cheap services for the consumer.

Other items in the expenditure accounts are Housing,

LOCAL GOVERNMENT SERVICES

£32.4 millions (against which there is, of course, revenue) ; Police, £21.7 millions, Lunacy—Mental deficiency, £10.6 millions ; Public lighting, £4.3 millions ; Justice, £1.4 millions ; Miscellaneous, £31.8 millions.

This lightning glance at the services rendered by local authorities must suffice the present purpose. It enables the average reader to assess roughly the total importance of the chief services rendered to the individual both directly, as when his opportunities for a clean and healthy life are increased, education is provided for himself and family, and protection is provided for his person and property, etc., or indirectly, by the development of the social fabric which protects him from such dangers as arise from the unhealthy, uneconomic and unæsthetic development of his neighbour's person or property, and provides instead an environment both physical and moral fit for a civilised life.

The particulars given above are not, however, sufficient to enable the ratepayer to decide whether he is or is not receiving full value for money. Value for money is a difficult conception covering in this connection at least three distinct questions. First, is the total service rendered worth the money and effort which it costs ? For instance, are the health services with the increased life and cleanliness involved worth the total cost, or is a supply of clean drinking and washing water worth the cost of the water rate ?

Secondly, is the latest increase or improvement of any service worth what it costs ? For example, the latest municipal clinic, or the building of a new transport route ?

Thirdly, are the services managed with the utmost efficiency, or could the same services be obtained at lower costs, or the increased services at the same total cost ?

It is to the first question that attention has been directed in the preceding paragraphs. The second and

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACE TO FACE

third questions are really not susceptible of treatment within the scope of a brief pamphlet. They involve an investigation of special circumstances and must be decided by each locality and authority for itself. It is, however, relevant to ask whether the structure and practical working of local government institutions are such as to give confidence regarding their ability to achieve economy and efficiency and, at the same time, democratic control.

CHAPTER II

How Local Areas are Governed

THE CONTROL, DIRECTION and management of local government services are in the hands of Parish Meetings, Parish Councils, Rural and Urban District Councils, Borough Councils (County and non-County Boroughs), County Councils, and a series of specially constituted bodies for special purposes such as drainage, water supply, docks, etc. The variety of structure which they cover is bewildering; these Councils, even when their legal status is similar, differ greatly in the size and type of population which they serve.

County Borough Councils number 83, ranging in size from Canterbury with a population of 24,500 to Birmingham with a population of 1,002,000. The total population governed by these councils numbers 13,300,000 living on an area of 740,000 acres, equal to about 2 per cent. of the total area of the country. In these areas all the functions of local government are concentrated under one authority—the county borough council. Expenditure in the year 1929-30 amounted to £216.3 millions.

The remaining 98 per cent. of the area of the country is divided up into 66 administrative counties, the largest of which is Lancashire, with a total population of 1,795,000 and the smallest, Rutland, with a population of only 17,400. The total expenditure of all County Councils in the year 1929-30 mounted to £76.8 millions. In these areas, however, the functions of local government are shared by the county councils, non-county

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACE TO FACE

borough councils, urban and rural district councils, and parish councils. The diagram at the end of this pamphlet is an attempt to show how the functions are shared by the various authorities.

In consequence of the revision of areas which is proceeding under the Local Government Act, 1929, statistics of local authorities are in a condition of rapid change. The latest information available shows, however, that there are 258 non-county borough councils, governing between them a population of 5,400,000, and covering an area of 896,700 acres, the largest of which is Walthamstow with a population of 133,000 and the smallest, Montgomery, with a population of only 918. Their total expenditure in 1929-30 amounted to £59.1 millions.

Then there are 770 urban district councils with a total area of 2,767,000, and a total population of 8,842,000, the largest of which is Willesden, with a population of 184,000, and the smallest Kirklington-cum-Upstand, with a population of only 251. The total expenditure of these authorities amounted in 1929-30 to £75.9 millions.

Finally, there come the 630 rural districts covering about 88 per cent. of the area of the country, but only 20 per cent. of its population, i.e., an area of 32,861,000 acres and a population of 8,000,000. The most populated is Easington with a highly concentrated population of 88,000, and the most sparsely populated, Llanwithiel, with a population of 349. The total expenditure of the rural district councils in 1929-30 amounted to £44.2 millions.

Rural districts are divided into more than 12,500 parishes. Those with populations exceeding 300—some 7,100—have Parish Councils. The remaining 5,400 have parish meetings. Parishes exercise minor administrative duties, and may levy a rate up to eightpence in the pound.

CHAPTER III

London the Powerful

THE SYSTEM OF local authorities in London and the distribution of their powers differ considerably from that of the country generally. Over the whole area of 74,850 acres, with its population of 4,400,000, the London County Council exercises considerably greater powers over health and other social services than those possessed by any other county authority. The total expenditure of the County Council during the year 1929-30 amounted to £42.9 millions.

Then comes the City of London with its great historical record, its great wealth, and its exceptional powers, with an area of only 673 acres and a resident night population of 10,700. In two important respects the functions of the Corporation are less than those of the normal county borough—it is not the authority for elementary education, and its duties as a public health authority are limited by the functions of the L.C.C. On the other hand, as the Port of London Sanitary Authority, its jurisdiction extends to the whole port ; it is the market authority for the whole of London ; it maintains valuable open spaces for Greater London—including Epping Forest, Wanstead Park, Highams Park, Burnham Beeches, Coulsdon Commons, West Ham Park, Queen's Park, Kilburn, and Highgate Woods ; and either alone or jointly with some of the City Companies and other trustees it administers valuable educational foundations.

Twenty-eight Metropolitan Boroughs cover between

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACE TO FACE

them an area of 74,172 acres. The largest both in acreage and population is Wandsworth, with some 356,000 inhabitants on 9,199 acres. Total rateable value, however, is greatest in Westminster, where it amounts to over £10 millions. The smallest of these boroughs, both in area and population, is Holborn, with a population of less than 40,000 housed on 405 acres. The lowest total rateable value is found at Stoke Newington, where it amounts to about £425,000.

The powers and duties of these Borough Councils differ considerably from borough councils in other parts of the country. Finance, however, gives a rough indication of the distribution of powers between the London County Council and the Metropolitan Borough Councils. Thus the total expenditure of the L.C.C. in 1929-30 amounted to £42.9, while that of the 28 borough councils and the City of London Corporation amounted to £22.5.

In addition to this, London is peculiar in that many services which in the provinces are provided by the local authorities are in London provided direct by the central government. Thus, some of the most important public parks are maintained by the Commissioners of Woods and Forests, and the administration of the Metropolitan Police is controlled by the Home Office. The central government also plays an important part in all questions of traffic control.

CHAPTER IV

Joint Boards and Committees

THERE ARE, THROUGHOUT the country, in addition to the local authorities for general purposes, a considerable number of joint authorities for special purposes, of which the following are the chief :

JOINT LOCAL BOARDS FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES

<i>Object</i>	<i>Numbers of Boards</i>
Joint Hospitals	80
Isolation Hospitals (infection diseases) ..	79
¹ Port Sanitary Authorities	61
Gas and Water Undertakings	30
Sewerage	28
Electric Supply	4
Tramways, etc.	4
Rivers Pollution	4
Cemeteries	3

¹ Normally, though not always, joint boards.

There are also four instances where local authorities and railway companies have established joint boards for the management and control of public service vehicles, i.e., omnibus and charabanc services. This form of co-operation between public authorities and private enterprise is a new and interesting experiment so far as this country is concerned.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACE TO FACE

Many instances also occur where the services of a local authority are extended beyond their own boundaries, but which are not governed by any statutory joint board. Joint Boards are normally resorted to only where it is desired to hold property in common. In other cases the conditions governing the extension of services are normally arranged either by permanent joint committees exercising varying degrees of executive power, or by joint consultations of varying degrees of permanence.

Where a local authority, for instance, provides or proposes to provide a school, either elementary, secondary, or technical, arrangements are frequently made with the authorities in adjacent areas for the admission of what are termed extra district pupils or students. It is seldom, however, that such arrangements include any joint responsibility either for the provision or maintenance of the institution concerned. The maintenance and management of educational institutions provided by local authorities normally remain under the control of that authority, the function of adjacent authorities being normally limited to negotiations regarding the terms on which students residing within their areas shall be admitted. Joint consultation is becoming more usual than hitherto in determining the function which a school or college should fulfil, but machinery for a more complete rationalisation of the institutions engaged in higher education may become both more usual and permanent in the near future. Thus, where two adjacent authorities run technical colleges, it may be wasteful to have them doing similar work and competing for the support of the same body of students. The field of technical and higher education is, however, so vast, that specialisation can usually be arranged, such arrangements resulting in a net increase or improvement in the education facilities available for both communities

JOINT BOARDS AND COMMITTEES

The joint town planning committees, on the other hand, are purely consultative bodies, and it is left to the authorities represented on these bodies to put into operation any recommendations which they may make.

Most of the joint committees of local authorities are, however, concerned with the trading undertakings or with some of the other services for which joint boards might have been established. In these cases the undertaking or services is owned and managed by one of the authorities concerned ; the joint committee is the vehicle by which agreements are reached between the authorities actually interested in or affected by the service.

CHAPTER V

A Glance at History

THE GREAT IRREGULARITY in the size and importance of local authorities, even when they enjoy the same legal status, is to a considerable extent due to historical accident, and its persistence to the present date is largely due to the prevalence of the belief that an institution which has grown by accident is naturally better than one which has been deliberately cultivated by authority. But a glance at history does not inspire confidence in this faith. For instance, many of the small urban districts owe their origin to the adoption by parishes of the Local Government Act, 1858, with the object of avoiding the consequence of the Highway Act of 1862 which provided for the combination of rural parishes in highway districts—a proceeding which was stopped by Parliament in 1863. Again, there are also some rural districts so limited in population and resources as to be unable effectively to carry out their duties. Some such districts—Mr. I. G. Gibbon informed the 1923 Royal Commission on Local Government—are the result of repeated extensions of, or the formation of new, urban districts, leaving an ill-shaped, thinly-populated area under the jurisdiction of the rural district council. In some cases the rural district consists of areas wholly detached from each other.

A number of rural districts were also formed in consequence of the provisions of the Local Government Act, 1894, which required that if a rural district were in

two counties there must be a separate authority for the part in each county, unless the county councils concerned otherwise directed; and some of these rural districts are not, and never were, suitable for separate units of administration.

Evidence such as this destroys blind faith in the supposed English virtue of muddling through. In dealing with institutions this nation has been timid—partly no doubt because being ahead of others it was experimental, and partly also because by its democratic spirit it is sensitive alike to the pressure of special interests and the general will of the public. The English nation, nevertheless, has always moved most creatively when experiments have been ‘according to plan’ though not ‘restricted by plan.’

The idea of having specially created bodies for each piece of work has a long history and a seductive theoretical foundation; but it is inimical to the full development of local self government. In the eighteenth century it appeared to provide the only means of escape from inconveniences which, with the development of urban communities, had become intolerable. The attempt to live in crowded conditions without providing for sewerage services, removal of refuse, the provision of clean water or even for the lighting of the streets, was dangerous not only to the inhabitants of these localities, but to their neighbours. The old manorial organisation and municipal corporations had lost control of the economic life of the localities. The commercial, industrial and agricultural revolutions had bereft them of the functions on which all their other attributes were founded. Parliament had its eyes directed to the uttermost ends of the earth, and there was no one left on whom the responsibility devolved of providing for the material and physical safety and comfort of the local communities.

To cope with this growing menace the leading inhabitants of town after town got together and petitioned Parliament to empower them to act as improvement commissioners for their towns. By this process the most primitive of the needs of many towns was provided before the reform period of the nineteenth century—improvement commissioners for towns, turnpike trusts for main roads, commissioners of sewers for the drainage and protection of low-lying lands, etc. But the needs of the community were still very inadequately met; within the sphere of the public health and related services there was considerable concentration of powers in the hands of the Sanitary Districts, but one conscious move towards the creation of a system of local government—a system which would concentrate on one local authority the responsibility of viewing all the services together as one whole chargeable to one purse—thus, when in 1870 the State took its big step in elementary education, it decreed the setting up of a completely new series of local bodies for the new service, and the administration of the old poor law remained in the hands of another special body—the Boards of Guardians—until 1929.

CHAPTER VI

The "Ad Hoc" Theory

THE THEORY OF the *ad hoc* body is one that makes a powerful appeal to the enthusiast who is intent on securing the start or development of a new service. For several generations the enthusiast for education believed the only way to enlist the voluntary services of local educationists was by having special school boards charged with the duty of providing educational facilities. Again, it was argued, how could the electorate keep effective control of policy unless there were separate elections for each service? Others, possibly not so much concerned with theories of democracy, questioned whether a body charged with the duty of providing sewers and maintaining roads had any special qualifications for administering an education service or providing for the indigent poor. But the disadvantages of this system are obvious. It denies to the electorate the responsibility of reviewing and voting on its problems of local government as a whole; and it leads straight to the doctrine that local authorities should only do the things for which Parliament has specifically granted them powers, a serious limitation of local self-government.

The Local Government Act of 1929 did not remove the whole of the consequences of this long history of *ad hoc* bodies, but by the abolition of the special poor law authority it did establish the doctrine that local government was not a mere congeries of unrelated ser-

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACE TO FACE

vices, but a unity to be directed and administered together in each district by one authority.

No community—or individual—can be truly self-governing until it attains the status of economic or financial independence. As regards local government, the provisions of the 1929 Act mark a great step forward in this direction. The problem has not been a simple one, but it now appears to be 'well in hand.' The trouble, of course, had its origin in the fact that whereas the central government, in response to the needs and wishes of a nationally conscious electorate, desired to promote education, public health and other local services, it was by no means satisfied that the same electorate, acting locally, would demand those services in the same measure. Experience proved that there was substance in those fears at the time, though with the increased democratisation of the franchise and the development of local and social consciousness it may not be so to-day. Parliament, therefore, decided on a policy which has been described as one of bribery and cajolery, and prided itself that it had paid a more handsome compliment to local self-consciousness than had any continental government.

The appellation "bribery and cajolery" was not quite fair. What happened was that the Government undertook to meet a certain proportion of the costs of approved services, such as the salaries of approved medical officers of health, and the costs of some of the newer services. Another device was for the Government to pay certain sums on the achievement of prescribed results—this was the old system of the grants in aid of education. To gain the maximum advantage from the system, local authorities, before deciding their own policy, had to obtain from Central Government Departments prior approval of their plans, they had to submit to inspection while the work was in progress, and to

THE "AD HOC" THEORY

audit and other tests after it had been completed. Thus, whatever advantages this system possessed it had the great disadvantage that it deprived local authorities of that degree of responsibility for policy which public election should imply. Under the Local Government Act, 1929, an effort is being made to overcome this difficulty. The scheme of "block grants"—covering all locally administered grant-earning services with the exception of education, police, and roads—allots to each local authority an annual lump sum grant, leaving the local authority considerable freedom in the spending of that money.

Then there is the problem of the poor district on whom the cost of necessary services fall with undue weight. In 1928 the "Report of the Liberal Industrial Enquiry" gave prominence to two aspects of this problem. The burden of rates, they pointed out, "is spread most unequally between different industries and districts. The depression of the exporting industries during the last few years has led to abnormally heavy expenditure on poor relief, and correspondingly heavy rates in those districts where the exporting industries are centred. Thus . . . in just those districts where there is the most unemployment and where it is therefore most desirable that new industries should be established, a special discouragement is extended to any manufacturer who is looking out for a site for a new works."

The same report also emphasised that for a similar reason there was a tendency, owing to the fact that the inhabitants of some local government areas are nearly all poor, whereas others have a wealthier population, for the burden of rates to fall on individuals in inverse proportion to ability to pay. The first difficulty was met by the de-rating scheme of 1929, and an effort was made to deal the second under the "block grant" scheme

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACE TO FACE

of the Local Government Act, 1929—the grant being calculated on a formula which gives weight to the factors of “ability to pay” and to the “need for social services”.

The next great step in the development of a well-ordered system of responsible local self-government is the tidying up of the areas of local authorities. (Earlier passages in this pamphlet have directed attention to the great variations in the status and size of local authorities.) Under the 1929 Act the initiative in this task is left to the local authorities themselves.

The terms of the Act—a recognition of the status to which local authorities have risen—are as follows :—

“The council of every county shall as soon as may be after the commencement of this Act, after conferences with representatives of the councils of the several districts wholly or partly within the county, review the circumstances of all such districts, and consider whether it is desirable to effect any of the following changes :

- (a) any alteration or definition of the boundaries of any such district or of any parish ;
- (b) the union of any such district or parish with another such district or parish ;
- (c) the transfer of any part of such district or parish to another district or parish ;
- (d) the conversion of any such district or any part thereof, if it is a rural district, into an urban district, or if it is an urban district, into or so as to form part of a rural district ;
- (e) the formation of any new district or parish ; and shall forthwith after the review is completed as respects the whole or any part of the county, and before the first day of April, nineteen hundred and thirty-two, or such later date as the Minister may in any case allow,

THE "AD HOC" THEORY

send to the Minister a report of the review, together with proposals as to the changes, if any, which they consider desirable :

Provided that, before making any such proposals the county council shall consult with the councils of the county boroughs adjoining the county, and the Minister shall give those councils an opportunity of laying before him their views on the proposals made by the county council . . ."

" . . . If an objection with respect to any proposal is made by a local authority affected thereby, and is not withdrawn, the Minister shall not make an order giving effect to the proposal without first holding a local enquiry into the objection."

Considerable progress has already been made in the amalgamation of authorities, and the re-planning of areas for which these words make provision.

CHAPTER VII

Committees and their Relations

SUITABLE AREAS, ADEQUATE powers, financial independence—these are necessary pre-requisites of efficiency, but they are not proofs of its actual achievement. For these it is necessary to examine the inner workings of this remarkable machine. But peeps behind the scenes of local government are not easy to obtain. Every Councillor on seeking re-election assures his constituents that most of the work of the Council is done on Committees, though it is seldom he tells his audience much about the workings of these bodies.

Committees on the average have twenty members, a chairman, and a chief official. This constitution, with its comparatively small membership, its part-time chairman and whole-time paid official, is of precisely the same type as a board of directors in a large commercial or industrial concern; and in business circles it is believed that experience shows this to be the best available constitution.

But the problems of local government are not precisely the same as those of business, and it is not surprising to find, amongst those with most experience of local government work, a strong movement to improve upon the model of the business world. Thus the Town Clerk of Norwich writes: Parliament "has spent a great deal of its time in passing large numbers of Acts of Parliament placing additional duties on local authorities. . . . Each of these provisions seems to be purposely designed

COMMITTEES AND THEIR RELATIONS

to render each branch of local government work a separate unit governed by a separate committee which should take a pride in it. . . . Each Committee tends to lay great stress on its statutory rights . . . which in effect means that their one desire is to run their own little show in their own little way. But is it really true that the part is greater than the whole ? ”

Here are two respects in which local government management differs from commercial business. It is subject to greater Parliamentary control and interference, and the work of each committee must be co-ordinated with the work of other committees to an extent almost unknown to boards of directors. The new and higher status of local authorities may in future be counted on to prevent the recurrence of the kind of interference of which the Town Clerk of Norwich complains, and provided local authorities take the initiative, may prove sufficient to enable them to overcome the difficulties which past history has imposed upon them.

The problem of co-ordinating the work of each committee with that of others, and with the work of the Council as a whole, is not an easy matter. It is not surprising that in different localities different views prevail. Some Councils prefer a large number of small committees to thrash out details, but with very limited powers to decide or take action—action being subject to approval by the Council. Others prefer to work with a few large committees, each committee exercising considerable powers and reporting to the council at infrequent intervals and when major issues of policy have to be decided.

Another difficulty arises regarding the scope of work remitted to committees : should the unit of committee organisation be the specific service rendered to the public, or should it be based on the staff organisation required to provide the services ? (For instance, should the

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACE TO FACE

responsibility for fire brigade stations rest with the fire brigade committee, or with a public buildings and works committee ?) or can some compromise be reached which would possess the advantages of both systems ?

At the present time, when everyone is experimenting or watching the experiments of others, no final solution of these problems can be offered. A few particulars of one heroic attempt to devise a form of organisation suitable to the present status and needs of local government may, perhaps, help to make clear the nature of the problem. The following quotations are from the " Report by the Town Clerk and the City Chamberlain " (Treasurer in England) on the administrative arrangements of the City of Edinburgh for carrying out the Local Government (Scotland) Act, 1929 :

" Many members of Local Authorities and other persons interested in public administration have recognised that, through the force of circumstances and the pressure of business, the Town Council of the future must become more and more a deliberative and less and less an administrative body. The Town Council on this view will in short become something of the nature of a Parliament—the local Parliament for the City of Edinburgh. It will then concern itself mainly with policy and the general direction of affairs, and it will be left, as far as possible, to Committees to carry that policy into effect, and to attend to all the details of administration. Where the duties are so many and so varied, it is apparent that each Councillor cannot be expected to keep in close touch with every subject which comes before the Council. Individual members of Council, while having a general cognisance of the direction of the policy of each department, will require to specialise in particular branches of Municipal Administration. It would seem that a system of devolution of duties would greatly assist this process of specialising.

COMMITTEES AND THEIR RELATIONS

“While it is desirable that the Town Council should make as wide a delegation to Committees as possible, there is one respect at least in which such delegation should be restricted—perhaps severely restricted. It is essential that the Town Council should always retain a strict control over finance. In no case should a delegation be made which does not secure, first, that the annual estimate or budget of a Committee shall be subject to the approval of the Council, and, second, that the Committee shall not be allowed without the special consent of the Council to incur any item of expenditure not included in the annual estimate. The Treasurer’s Committee should, as at present, act as the agent of the Council in co-relating estimates, advising on supplementary votes and in general reporting to the Town Council upon matters involving charges upon local funds.”

“With a view to carrying out the policy of classifying the functions of the Town Council in as few groups as possible, it is suggested that the number of Standing Committees should be fixed at nine (excluding the Valuation Appeals Committee, which only meets occasionally).

“These Committees, it is suggested, should be as follows :

1. Lord Provost’s.
2. Treasurer’s.
3. Public Health.
4. Education.
5. Public Assistance.
6. Public Utilities.
7. Streets and Buildings.
8. General Purposes.
9. Trinity Hospital.

“Each of these Committees would in turn appoint Sub-Committees, and to the extent of the delegation

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACE TO FACE

to them the Committee would act as the final determining body."

To-day's opinion in Edinburgh is that the re-organisation of the Council's committee system was necessary to secure the efficient carrying on of local government with the new responsibilities added by the 1929 Act, that without some system of devolution there would have been congestion and possible confusion at the administrative centre. The scheme adopted and now operating has not only enabled the Council to absorb a vast amount of new work, it has enabled it to obtain the advantages of large scale production, and to indulge in a degree of specialisation on the various subjects of administration, which, however, is not so highly developed as to permit of the ignoring by the staff generally of the interests of the community as a whole in relation to the municipal services.

CHAPTER VIII

Brains in Committees

ANOTHER ASPECT OF the committee system which has received recent consideration is its ability to contribute thought as well as proper sanction to the work of the authority.

Two of the greatest obstacles to obtaining the best thought from committees are :

- (1) The removal of the discouragements which arise from the constant discovery of such things as the limitation of powers, prior commitments of the authority, and the bewildering complexity of much of the business submitted ;
- (2) The absence of stimuli to take up what has been described as the intolerable burden of thought.

Efficient thinking by a committee is not an easy achievement. Most people require the isolation of a study before undertaking the intolerable burden of constructive thought. Groups or committees, unless carefully organised, tend to become discursive and the slower minds tend to leave matters to those with the gift of quick and persuasive repartee. Many have felt that the ideal conditions for committee work arise when the members are fairly experienced and good-tempered, and cease to think of themselves as constituting a committee. Their colleagues become and remain individuals—Brown, or Smith, or Miss Jones. Personal good-will half-con-

sciously asserts itself, and is aided by the habits acquired in social intercourse. Brown would say afterwards, not "I attended a meeting of the sub-committee yesterday," but "Smith and Miss Jones and I had quite a nice time yesterday afternoon arranging about the new North Ward School."

But local government is rapidly leaving behind it the conditions which made it either necessary or possible for Smith, Miss Jones and me to spend a nice afternoon arranging for the North Ward School, and the change is for the better. The concentration of all local government work on general local authorities, and the creation of larger authorities, makes it impossible for councillors to do the detailed work themselves, and at the same time retain control of policy.

Speaking on this subject at a recent meeting Sir Ernest Simon, of Manchester, observed that "On the whole the more technical the committee is, the less the members interfere, and the better the work is done." Local government officers may thank Sir Ernest for the compliment to their efficiency, but they do not desire to leave the problem there. It is not enough to know that where committees do not interfere the work is well done. What is desired is that committee methods should be so organised as to produce and develop the best thought on questions of policy. Now control of policy involves the examination of particular proposals in the light of general principles and of all the attending circumstances; and also the examination and consideration of general principles in the light of particular instances. It is a difficult enough task for an individual mind, and one which calls for the greatest skill in the organisation and methods of committees and councils, when it falls to their lot to carry the burden.

More than two thousand years ago Socrates perfected a method of collective reasoning about principles which

has come to be known as the "Socratic dialectic," but the burden of it was intolerable to his fellow-citizens, who compelled him to drink poison. Since then none has ventured to draw truth from the confusions of many minds, with anything approaching the cold precision of Socrates. It may be doubted whether the English committee method properly organised and run is not, for the purpose in hand, more effective than real Greek "dialectic" could be. With things so intangible as social needs, and so vigorously unmanageable as public opinion, it may be that the best that can be hoped for is some system which will enable the 'authority' to feel its way towards the right decision, as most committees tend to do, rather than to carve its way to it by a more highly intellectualised dialectic.

The problem of how committees should organise their work so that the contact of mind with mind may stimulate and not confuse thought is one which calls for a careful examination of experience. Much can be achieved by councillors and officials consciously giving their minds to it. Attention might be given to procedure so that at each stage it may be clear to everyone what is the point to be decided, and also what facts have to be assimilated or any conclusion reached. This, of course, leads directly to a consideration of the form and content of the reports submitted by officials, a matter which has recently received more attention in America than it has in this country. It should be regarded as a primary duty of officials to make their reports interesting, to bring out vividly the points on which decisions are required, to state clearly the alternatives and the probable consequence of each.

Where a report is intended to test the results of a policy or the progress of an undertaking the same considerations should apply. Its terms should be clear, irrelevant information should be excluded, and, wherever

possible, comparative information of a type calculated to arouse interest and to facilitate proper consideration of important matters should be supplied.

These are not, in themselves, simple requirements, and in the course of his work the official is subject to strong temptation. He soon realises that a strongly stimulated committee is not an unmixed blessing, and that even if there were little wisdom there was certainly much experience behind the advice tendered by an old Minister of State to a newcomer: 'Never interest a democratic assembly if you want business done, muddle it with detail, be dull, soothe it to sleep.'

Assuming goodwill and public spirit on the part of those mainly concerned, it is clear that the committee system of local government can be developed from its present very considerable efficiency to much greater power and usefulness. As with individuals, the greatest danger is the reluctance of committees to recognise their own limitations. Committees cannot, for instance, produce the finished 'thought' as efficiently as the individual brain; they cannot execute or supervise a piece of work with the meticulous care or thoroughness of an individual. They must recognise these things. But wisely organised and directed they can, by the contact of mind with mind, stimulate the thought of individuals; they can in the light of varied experience check unwise enthusiasms and support the efforts of the wise. The function of the committee is not necessarily or mainly to cool the warm ardour generated by platform rhetoric, but to harness it to the public service and to make it efficient in action. As, in the long run, the development of any institution depends on its efficiency, the task of improving the working methods of committees is commended to those concerned with the future democratic control of local government.

CHAPTER IX

Frank Co-operation Wanted

THE SUCCESSFUL CARRYING out of this policy, does, of course, imply a clearer recognition on the part of both elected councillors and officials of the proper sphere of the other. As regards the recognition by the official of the proper sphere of the councillors for policy, it is relevant to note the following passage from a recent lecture given by Mr. I. G. Gibbon at Manchester University: "Major policies are usually determined by currents which lie deeper than thought, though thought may dress them in a show of reasoning, may settle their precise form and may even determine largely how effective the forces shall be."

It is in this fact rather than in the requirements of the law or the forms of democracy that the true justification for the submission of officials to the over-riding authority of the representatives of the democracy, assembled in committee or council, is to be found. Within the sphere of local government it is the essence of efficiency that policy move in consonance with those deep currents referred to by Mr. Gibbon. And it has been discovered that frank co-operation between the lay councillor exercising authority and the expert official tendering advice and supplying information has produced results good in themselves and acceptable to the democracy.

On the other hand it is incumbent on the representative to recognise the part played by the official, and to avoid some of the discouragements which, if practised, would

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACE TO FACE

affect official thought and initiative. The Bridgeman Committee in its Report on the Post Office pointed an authoritative finger at the kind of attitude which does harm :

“ No organisation can fail to be adversely affected when on the one hand it is denied credit that is its due, and on the other, is subjected to continuous and often unfair and uninformed criticism. In such circumstances the staff cannot fail to become disheartened and demoralised.”

As regards the individual the attitude described gives rise to the belief that ‘ I shall be blamed if it goes wrong and shan’t be praised if it goes right.’

Beyond submitting a prayer that councillors may set their hearts against the development of a false attitude towards officials, emphasizing the repercussions of such an attitude on the efficiency of the council itself, there appears to be little that can be done about it. One suggestion has been made, however, and it may be worthy of serious consideration. It is that elected councillors should accord greater public recognition to work performed by officials. Such recognition possibly extending in appropriate cases to the public identification of named officials with particular pieces of work. The bearing of responsibility must carry as its reward due recognition of the merits of work well done. Such recognition, it is suggested, will not offend the common prejudice against bureaucracy. Democracy resents the assumption of authority falsely based, but the frank recognition of responsibility based on competence is more pleasing than the exercise of an unseen power.

There can be little doubt that the relations of councils and officials are by custom soundly based. Custom has decreed that in Local Government the official is on “tap but not on top”. On this basis the elected members and the appointed officials have both learned that

FRANK CO-OPERATION WANTED

strength comes with a due recognition of the breathing space and sunshine required by the other.

A very practical necessity if the advantages of full confidence and co-operation between local authorities and their officials is to be achieved is that the councils must realise and act with a full sense of their responsibilities as employers of the officials. Cases are not unknown where councillors have proposed treatment of officials which, if practised in private business, would bring disaster. Neither unfairness nor injustice can ever be truly economical.

CHAPTER X

Finding the Right Officials

ACCORDING TO SIR Ernest Simon, "the fact that our cities are fairly well governed is due mainly to two things—Firstly, because it is customary to appoint a body of officials who are competent, honest, and fairly well paid."

The officials of local authorities—excluding workmen—number about 130,000, of whom some 16,000 are only part-time officials. Probably more than three-quarters of these employed by the County Councils, County Borough Councils, and the Councils of the larger boroughs and Urban Districts. Recruitment to the service normally takes place at about the age of 16 or 17, the standard of education required varying from Authority to Authority, but there is a growing tendency for Authorities to insist on the School Leaving Certificate or the Matriculation standard of the Universities.

Subsequent training depends, to a large extent, on the branch of the Service entered. Thus the articled apprentice of the Town Clerk will normally spend five years studying for the certificates of the Law Society. The young clerk in the 'Treasurer's Department spends five or six years securing the membership of the Institute of Municipal Treasurers and Accountants. In all there are about thirty professional bodies, each conducting examinations requiring three to six years' study, recognised by local authorities as of value. These are the bread and butter qualifications of the local government officer, and constitute his claim to professional recognition.

The prominence given to professional or "specialist" qualifications in the local government service continues

strongly with the civil service. Here the chief administrative posts are normally filled by persons who have been recruited through the Class I Examination, which is based entirely on the general studies conducted by the Universities with no bias in favour of those whose studies would appear to have a direct bearing on the work to be undertaken in later life.

It is not claimed that the civil service system is necessarily the best, or that it could be adopted in the very different conditions to be found in the local government service. But it does emphasize the importance of securing for public administration highly trained minds that will habitually view each particular case in the light of general principles derived from a wide experience.

The development of local government has never favoured the same prominence being given to this need. For instance, when the Public Health Laws were being enacted the administrative need visualised was for qualified medical men, assisted by other technical officers, to apply their provisions, and so it has been with other services. The minds responsible for viewing each part of the local administration in the light of the whole were to be supplied by the elected and co-opted members of the local authority. This history may have given rise to excessive departmentalism in the staff organisation of the local authorities. The Town Clerk of Norwich suggests that committees come to act as if the little show over which they rule is more important than the work of the council as a whole. A contributory cause of this may be that they are impelled along that route by officials who have been expected always to think in terms of their departments only, and not to bother about the work of the Council as a whole. One of the most important responsibilities of every council is, therefore, to so arrange the recruitment, training and organisation of their staffs as to avoid this and other disadvantages.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT FACE TO FACE

The part played by the Clerk in securing the co-ordination of the policy and work of the various departments was explained in a recent memorandum by the National Association of Local Government Officers.

"The Clerk to the authority is recognised as the principal officer, but the part he plays varies with the personalities of the individual and his colleagues and the size of the authority. There is usually a fairly well-defined relationship between him and the other heads of departments, though it is not committed to writing.

"The Clerk is responsible for the co-ordination of the work of all departments and the degree of co-ordination secured by him varies first with the authority and the influence of the Clerk, and, secondly, with the extent to which the other heads of departments consult him.

"The most successful administration is found where the Clerk keeps in touch with the operations of all departments, but does not interfere with the technical officers in purely technical matters.

"In the case of smaller towns the influence of the Town Clerk in connection with the work of other departments is usually greater than in the case of the large authorities.

"In some authorities it is the custom for heads of departments to confer periodically upon the work and proposed developments in each department. In most authorities, the heads of the departments confer with the Town Clerk on important matters before reporting to their committees. These conferences and consultations tend to smooth working and efficiency."

Another sign of loosening of the bonds of excessive departmentalism is the growing interest among local government officials in problems of business organisation. In the study and discussion of this subject the local government officer is sharing in the work which has been pioneered by some of the most progressive industrial managers in the country, and which has now

FINDING THE RIGHT OFFICIALS

found an important place in the work of a number of Universities. It concerns itself with such problems as the recruitment and qualification of staff; management of staff including the application of psychology; departmental organisation; delegation of authority and responsibility by those in high authority to their juniors and by centralised organisations to departments and branches; tests of efficiency applied to departments including cost accounting and other methods of efficiency, auditing, personnel administration and so on.

Quite the most encouraging of recent developments, however, is the interest in those legal, social and economic studies of the Universities which has begun to exercise an influence in the minds of local government officers. To meet this demand the National Association of Local Government Officers in 1930 started the organisation of Annual Summer Schools. These schools are held in one of the Colleges at either Oxford or Cambridge during the long vacation, and at one of the Scottish Universities. Lectures are delivered by some of the leading University authorities on the subjects studied, classes are run, and a touch of the practical is added by the talks given by leading officials from both Local and Central Government. It is a matter for congratulation that these schools are not only largely attended by local government officers, but also by elected members of local authorities.

Then there are two Universities—London and Manchester—which have established appropriate degrees, and these two universities, together with those of Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool and Sheffield, have established diploma or certificate courses.

With minor variations in detail these courses of study are based on the following subjects :

- (a) *History*, with its acute sense of perspective and causation in human affairs, and its study of actual environmental conditions and problems.

- (b) *Political philosophy*, which is largely concerned with conception of the State as the creator of individual rights.
- (c) *Law*, with its foundations laid deep in the conception of rights between neighbours and duties towards the State. Under this heading special attention is given to the law of the constitution, and to the new and very important branch—administrative law, including municipal law.
- (d) *Economics*, to which one looks for accurate knowledge of the causes of material well-being. Special attention is directed to that branch of the subject which deals with public finance, both on its expenditure and revenue sides.
- (e) *Institutions of Government*, which deals with the history, structure, and working of such institutions as the Monarchy, Parliament, the Cabinet, Government Departments, the Civil Service, Local Government Authorities, quasi-Government Authorities, such as the B.B.C., the Central Electricity Board, etc.
- (f) *Public Administration*. . . .

As this subject is new to the Universities a more careful explanation of its scope may be excused. It deals with such matters as the following :

- (i) The inner working of the institutions and authorities to which Parliament has delegated the administration of public business ;
- (ii) The advantages of different types of authority for different types of work, i.e., publicly elected authorities, authorities representative of various special interests, appointed authorities, central authorities, local authorities, *ad hoc* authorities, general authorities ; and the relation of officials to the representative element in each authority .

FINDING THE RIGHT OFFICIALS

- (iii) The distinction between the administrative function and the legislative function on the one hand and the judicial function on the other ; and the actual lines of demarcation between authorities and institutions.

The methods by which administrative authorities give consideration to special or unforeseen interests in applying the general rules framed by the ultimate authority ; e.g., the relationship, financial and political, between public utility services and (a) the general public, (b) producers of supplies, and (c) the consumers.

In studying these functions it is natural to contrast the flexibility of administrative technique with the rigidity of judicial technique, and the wide-sweeping comprehensiveness of good legislation, with the meticulous particularity of administrative decisions.

Then, turning from the study of the progress of general rules from their sources through the administrator to the individual citizen, the student gives consideration to the reaction of administrative experience, observation, and technique on the makers of general rules, whether they speak in Parliament or council chamber.

The development of these studies is based on the actual experience of administrators in dealing with particular problems, such as those which govern the making of administrative orders carrying the force of law ; the reactions of a Government Department to the two sides in a trade dispute ; the contacts between the Government Departments and the various special interests which require consideration before policy is determined, or during its administration ; the relationship of the local official to the general public whom he serves and on whose behalf he operates the gas, electrical, water, tramways, and other services, whose rates he collects and

whose town he helps to govern. And it directs attention to the relations of the different organs of government to each other.

The raw material for this kind of study cannot be isolated in a laboratory, it has to be collected from the particular experiences of individuals, the man in the street, the statesman, the councillor, and the man or woman in the office.

These courses of study, when grouped in the way suggested above, are of special and immediate interest to persons engaged on the work of a local authority or government department, but their interest and importance is not limited to them. Their function is to seek and develop knowledge of the nature and working of our common life, not merely as a series of abstract principles, but also as it unfolds and expands in the contacts of everyday affairs. The bounds of their usefulness have not been set, nor the depth of their significance plumbed.

Such, then, are the functions and such the structure and working methods of English local government. Perfection it cannot claim. It may not even claim that symmetry of structure or that precision of power which, to the student, are such pleasing features of some foreign systems. This, however, is no mere piece of government machinery with which we are concerned. Born and truly nurtured by the material and social needs of an individualised nation, endowed with the spirit and tradition of a great people, it has added strength to the resources of that nation, and has sweetened and ennobled the spirit which gave it life. It has drawn to itself that quality of service which can be propelled only by the divine spark—a sense of duty. The generation which has inherited these things has had imposed upon it a great trust.

